

Tenacious Imagination:

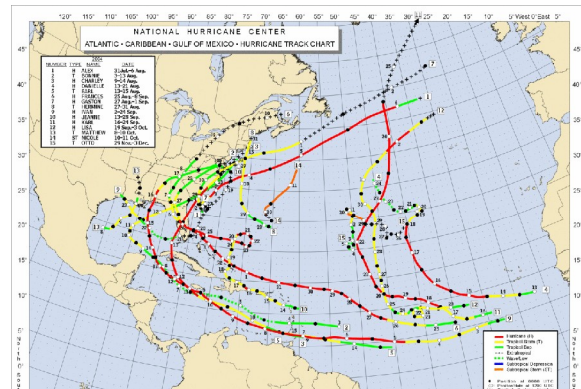
What Executives Can Learn from Hurricane Planning

Hurricane Katrina made quite a few goats of managers charged with disaster preparedness. Having watched the event unfold, many of us are left wondering: What lessons can we, as sales and marketing executives and corporate change agents, take from this about advance planning and disaster preparedness?

I'd like to suggest that one of the core lessons for planners is the value of "tenacious imagination," two qualities that are not often seen together. When they are, good things happen. Leaders with "tenacious imagination" help organizations produce insight and generate action. Imaginative thinkers detect all aspects of the problem and stimulate new thinking. Tenacious leaders promote dialogue about sacred cows and drive visible follow-up that overcomes inertia. Two examples from Katrina illustrate how tenacious imagination can help you meet even the biggest of challenges.

Hospitals: Strategic advance planning supports facile, fast hurricane responses

After three hurricanes battered its Florida hospitals in 2004, hospital company HCA Inc. convened site and executive managers for a meeting called "Hurricane Lessons Learned." HCA, which has 190 hospitals and 91 outpatient surgery centers in Southern coastal states, decided that advance planning would increase the likelihood that its facilities would be secure should a major hurricane hit.



1. NOAA: 2004 Hurricane Season

According to a *Wall Street Journal* report on the meeting, HCA's VP of Supply Chain Operations and his team used their experience of previous storms to imagine all the critical disruptions that occur after a hurricane and prepared for each. Recognizing that both land lines and cell phones could go dead, HCA provided hospitals with satellite phones to communicate with a planned command and control center in their Nashville headquarters. Anticipating that roads might be deluged, water, food, diesel fuel, gasoline and other critical supplies were stored in depots close to hospitals. Refrigeration for labs and diagnostic equipment was contracted with local suppliers. HCA's hospitals even installed hurricane shutters to minimize broken glass and maintained a supply of cash in vaults so employees could purchase emergency supplies when ATMs went down.

The advance planning of other hospitals focused on internal organizational integrity and vital human resources: They would take care of employees so employees could take care

of patients. Sacred Heart of Pensacola planned for family housing arrangements and generators and offered tree removal services to meet the needs of hospital employees so they could come to work. They stocked new scrubs in on-campus laundries, along providing a case of water and 20 pounds of ice per employee per day. Lee Memorial in Fort Myers set up resource centers for helping employees navigate complex government relief and insurance programs.

When Katrina hit, HCA's corporate command center in Nashville monitored the situation and tweaked their plan. After the levees broke in New Orleans, HCA identified helicopters for evacuation as the critical missing resource. They contracted 20 choppers to evacuate patients and employees from Tulane University Hospital. HCA used ham radio operators to provide ad hoc traffic control in the tight air space over the hospital. HCA not only evacuated their people from Tulane, but also aided many from a public hospital across the street. Their story was a sound success in the midst of many evacuation disasters.

“Hurricane Pam”: How an inefficient, ineffective planning process left an entire region stuck in the mud

In contrast with the success of these hospital chains in advance planning is the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) effort to prepare for a hurricane. FEMA has received widespread publicity for its embarrassing failure in New Orleans. But disaster might have been averted had FEMA's advance planning proved more effective.

Using the fictional scenario of “Hurricane Pam,” regional officials contracted for a \$500,000 meeting in July 2004 that involved 300 people over eight days in a “table-top simulation” of a major hurricane. The participants received a forecast from the National Weather Service that eerily foreshadowed Katrina. It predicted high winds, parts of New Orleans under 15-20 feet of water, 80% of buildings destroyed, and over 100,000 people without cars and unable to leave the city. The risk was real; shortly after the meeting, Hurricane Ivan just narrowly missed the city, telegraphing the urgent need to prepare.

Despite their clarity about imminent danger (not to mention the time and expense spent), participants did not undertake their planning with tenacious imagination. Unlike HCA, which engaged its full leadership, the most senior manager to participate in “Hurricane Pam” was a regional director of FEMA. Perhaps you can imagine the frustrations of on-the-ground managers who understood the potential for crisis but did not have the ear of Washington's decision makers.

The meeting report identified 15 action areas but set no priorities. These were described in bureaucratic language that failed to convey the potential for dire consequences and the urgent need for changed plans. No imagination was used to foresee and forestall likely problems.

Further, the follow-up schedule was not tenaciously enforced; although action plans were supposed to be presented within 60 days of the meeting, they were not delivered until November 2004. As a result, momentum for change stalled; recommendations for preparedness had not been approved by FEMA's Washington leadership when Katrina struck in August 2005.

How can you apply these lessons learned to your change efforts?

Take a page from HCA's book the next time you're planning to fix a problem or start a new initiative. As you apply tenacious imagination to crafting your plans, consult this checklist of seven "must-do" items that produce preparedness and high performance:

- ✓ *Tightly scope your objectives.* From the meeting's title to the simple agenda, "Hurricane Lessons Learned" crisply identified needs and solutions.
- ✓ *Design your meetings for people who don't like to sit.* Facilitators and the steering team responsible for the overall process must plan for a series of short, focused meetings that keep people's attention and generate clear reporting that communicates progress and accountability from one session to the next.
- ✓ *Senior and on-the-ground managers must participate.* Having both at the table is critical. "Doers" understand the detailed aspects of a situation and can generate the passion from having been in the storm without everything they needed to succeed. Once they understand the needs, executives can approve resources, policy changes, and a "bully pulpit" to overcome obstacles, particularly when success requires work across organizational boundaries. Because these doers and executives may not be used to direct dialogue, "smoke jumpers" may be needed as intermediaries to interview people from both groups beforehand and to bring back unvarnished reports to the steering committee on critical issues and what people need from the meeting.
- ✓ *Identify the critical tasks by diagramming the process.* HCA followed a simple model of listing gaps and solutions in three phases: preparation, response, and recovery. A visual picture helps people with different learning styles fill in important missing information and broaden the possible solutions that are generated. Diagrams can also stimulate discussions about why things are the way they are. Are the goals and incentives of people aligned? What efforts in conflict must be redirected?
- ✓ *Encourage simple, direct language.* Create an environment that allows for direct give and take and communicates importance and urgency. Be clear about priorities. Plan for how communication will reach all the people affected at the right time in ways they can quickly understand and act to reinforce your objectives.
- ✓ *Create clear, concise meeting records and a plan for no-excuses follow-up that builds trust among the people who must work together.* People will quickly lose interest if the promises of the first meetings are not kept. For longer-term efforts where changes in the way things have been done are required, planners should consider explicit strategies to change the behavior of people in critical roles. How will tools such as measurement, rewards, and recognition be used to persuade participants and reinforce the objectives? The best plan will be ineffective without tightly coupled training for key players who need to change their behavior or learn new skills.
- ✓ *Have a monitoring plan that allows for real-time adjustments during implementation.* Has the project manager been clearly identified? Does a system

exist to communicate and share information, even in adverse or high-stress conditions? Has the project team thought through how they would convene on short notice, and how to reach senior managers if changing conditions require high-level approvals?

Most of us will never face an overwhelming disaster like Hurricane Katrina, but we may have to successfully get through an organizational tempest or two of our own. By taking a page from the playbook of successful disaster planners like HCA, we, as leaders, can employ tenacious imagination to help our people move smoothly through any storm.

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